

## SOME MODERN NEW POETS

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Catching up with recent poetry publications is always a lesson in contingency. Some poets—in the cases of John Wilkinson and Peter Gizzi—have published again since September, outdating the books closest to my chair. Some books only came to my attention once summer had already come to an end. There are many poets that I simply haven't got to. And yet, there might be a mercy in these accidents: reading somewhat haphazardly allows one to draw up a bad map of the contemporary landscape, one which can be built upon in the months to come. Of the many symbols that might appear in the legend of that map, the proximity or distance of poems to provinces of the poetic repertoire which might be thought of as traditional (such as fixed form, metre, and rhyme), has been a constant point of reference.

The last four Faber New Poets—until further notice—are moving in decidedly various directions. Elaine Beckett (no. 13) has some well-turned anecdotes. Her response to *Blackfish*—the 2013 documentary film about Sea World—is funny. Her poem 'Sometime this Month' is in a different mode, a traditional song celebrating the blossoming of a certain tree in May, strong enough to bear updating to take in the teenagers on their lunchbreak. Crispin Best's pamphlet (14) is whimsical and witty in equal measure ('I'm an optimist / that's what I like about you'). There are some clever reversals in syntax here—'remember science is always doing something that we don't understand to the sky'—and deft repetition which makes for pop music. Yet this pamphlet remains awkwardly placed between satire and lyric, without striking a compromise. Sam Buchan-Watts (15) has a knack for the poem as prose-vignette—a dangerous task, since it risks collapsing into a case of the young poet looking at stuff. Yet here are several successful pieces in the tradition of Woolf's shorts or Stein's early prose poetry, particularly his 'study of two lamps and a painting'. 'The Days go Just Like that' and the following poem (the same title, held within quotation marks) are the best achieved in this collection, managing the relation between line and sense-unit flawlessly, as a stumbling consciousness awakes emerging from a wood to look for the city. Rachel Curzon's poems (16) are most effective where most elliptical and epigrammatic. Tending towards the confessional mode, Curzon's first pamphlet is more striking when it is less particular. Her simplistic diction is understated—and this is crucial to the comedy of the attack on middle class aspiration in 'Ultrasound'. However, this becomes more dangerous

once the poems move to consider questions of motherhood, personhood and ownership ('The Catch').

The new Penguin Modern Poets series have produced two beautiful books. Only just larger than Oxford's *Very Short Introductions*, they are modern in the sense that they are portable—though any line longer than the portrait margins necessitates an at first unexpected ninety-degree turn. The lack of introductions allows the selections to speak for themselves.

What Emily Berry, Anne Carson and Sophie Collins share (volume 1) is an understanding of lyric poetry not as expression but as a kind of attentive listening. Here modes of speech on the point of breakdown are rearranged in sequence or collage. The forms they work with are fragments of real speech, soundbites, ways of speaking in the world. The results are quite different. While Emily Berry's 'Dear Boy' sounds like something out *Brideshead Revisited*, it turns out to be just a letter, like the 'Letter to husband' in which a pile-up of unacknowledged quotation, delivered deadpan, is stacked to produce domino effects which may fall either side of funny or extremely dangerous—sometimes both: 'it might be better to not make any further suggestions'. The speakers in these poems are by turns confused, absurd, mocking, tender and official. 'Trees' captures the duplicity of speech as being both genuinely individual and pathologizable, apostrophising three trees: 'Is there anyone in the world who / has written a cheque and not felt like they were playing the part of someone writing a cheque?'

Selections from Anne Carson give us a sense of the range of her work outside of the translations for which she is known: short stories, vignettes, plays and fragments. Again, there's an active listening at work. The forward slash in 'Looking Good Ida' nails the syncopation required of a film script dialogue of a heist in a Laundromat. This is a playful selection. 'By Chance the Cycladic Peoples' plays with the Germanic reference system, gone awry, allowing the reader to take different routes through the narrative, requiring us to see poetry as an imaginative leap towards other times and places. Six translations of the same fragment of Ibykos—in the style of Berthold Brecht's F.B.I. file, or Endgame by Samuel Beckett—are not stylistic pastiches. Instead, the "translation" is thematic and the style is Carson's own.

Sophie Collins's 'Bunny' is an exercise for playing at speaking with authority which falls apart at the dress-rehearsal. The words of psychiatrists, helplines, police and priests are tried on for size—the reader listens out for where they do not fit. This is a style which, like

Berry's, has the measure of thought at the level of the sentence, but which is less concerned with inter-personal language acts as the grounds of social experience. Accordingly it includes Christianity, miracles, the legacy of communism and the politics of observation within its compass. 'Nolita' is perhaps the most effective poem in this latter vein, constructed via a repetition which constantly undoes itself, as 'Public enemies / review the public in public...'.

Volume Two collects poets working in a different poetic mode. Instead of attention to the sentence as the basic unit in which syntax and narrative have the upper hand, it asks us to think hard about the legacy of rhythm and rhyme, about timing and the punchline. Michael Robbins is a satirist, a little like Frederick Seidel, only less gross. An absurdist on all the important questions facing American culture ('I got a tattoo of God. You can't see it / but it's everywhere...'; 'But where's the whale on stilts that we were promised?') Robbins rounds up the usual suspects and makes them dance: whether he rhymes 'corn' and 'romance' in an otherwise perfectly respectable ballad (poetry as crossword = 'porn'), deploys a syntax of surprise: 'Some money bin I, a rich duck, swim in!' (Scrooge McDuck?), or double-puns: 'Sea world is all that is the case' (the *Tractatus*, read aloud by its author: "zee world iz all...") his virtuosity is a delight. Like all virtuosos, it is very often only just successful: the four-beat triple rhythm in 'Space Mountain' has in-built glitches, which recover just before the punchline. 'To the Drone Vaguely Realizing Eastward' distorts lyric apostrophe as voicemail in an effective confusion of address and agency: 'The camel can't come to the phone. / This is for the drone-in-chief. / Mumbai used to be Bombay. / The bomb bay opens with a queef.' You might think 'queef' was a filler—until you look it up—and the poem rounds on you complete. This is dazzling, necessary, cruel wit.

Robbins is a hard act to follow, but Lockwood achieves satire in a different way. A poet of the page, Lockwood's spacing is careful. Theodor Adorno writes that artworks can have the self-sufficient logic of dreams. Lockwood has created a poem-world with the logic of the video game 'The Sims'. She considers the *creatio ex nihilo* of crayons in the factory, the extended conceit of ink as bodily, the aspirations of the Loch Ness monster and all the sexual deviancies of nature. 'He Breaks Down in the Body of the Whale' (incidentally, whales are a common concern in many poems this year) is composed—unlike Robbins' line-bound poems—in units of sense, but builds its own structures and timings through repetition. The most effective poem like this is 'Rape Joke', which makes an art of artlessness. Anaphoric discomfort builds towards a punchline which doesn't arrive, and is all the more powerful when it doesn't.

The reader greedy for more from Tim Thornton's *Jocund Day* will be delighted by the selection of more recent poetry published here. 'The point of flattened skies is things are missing. / Like other things, flattened skies go missing'—lines like these make me realise that one frequently experiences something when reading Thornton, hard to describe, but if I were to try to put my finger on it: it's as if I just saw a thought process go by in language. This means that I am being constantly jolted out of my seat in which I was just listening to another persona. Partly this comes from the ever so subtly clever syntax ('now call it happened because it did') which joins without ever actually achieving the status of simile, making this a syntax of metaphor: 'therapeutically an airport / shaped like the air in an oboe snakes...' Yet this isn't the only poetic order: there is much of what John Wilkinson has called 'free unrhymed cadence' at work here: five beat and four beat lines break down because they must, resulting in a studied studiedlessness. The prose pieces—or 'researches'—in which the speaker confuses the sound of a lover's breathing with a car engine give us a phenomenology of listening with which to approach Thornton's concerns: intimacy and violence; animism and materialism, spiritualism and horoscopes, and the way that cafés can seem to close on you just as you approach.

Denise Riley's long awaited *Say Something Back* (London: Pimlico: 2016) does not disappoint. 'A Part Song'—first published in the *London Review of Books*—is well known. Its stations of the act of grieving constantly interrupt their own virtuosity with abrupt terminations of line, hyper-metricality and self-reflection. This is where Riley differs from W.S. Graham—similarly interested in acts of speaking and not hearing, absence and presence—who hardly ever breaks ranks, even in his fragmentary *Implements in Their Places* from which the title of Riley's collection comes. 'An awkward lyric' reads like a manifesto for this mode: the collection shifts between achieved song and a mistrust of lyricism. Much commentary has concentrated on the latter, yet there is more to be said about this poet's abilities: 'Listening for Lost People' and 'You men who go in living flesh' are both exemplary blank and ballad form, and a similar achievement is found in 'Catastrophic thinking'—a narrative allegory of shifting mental states in rhythmised prose. She can do Wordsworth's sonnets, no problem, though prefers to stay under Westminster Bridge. Some recognisably Rileyan moves reappear in this collection: she has a knack for titles, and for turning the line end to ask us to reconsider or reflect on the strange gaps between speech and life lived: 'so look lively / To where the lemon trees'; 'You must live as you can, which is all we ever did.' Yet Riley goes further here, exploding poetry. 'There aren't any stories' makes

light of the expectation that the poem might be as easy as an anecdote or comment, with a welcome moral on the boundary of belonging, while 'Touristic in Kyoto' is at once tragic and wry, dismantling the model of the poem as picture postcard. Instead, we witness a poet working over hymns and popular songs, rethinking rewriting what it is to stand at a tide edge now, after Dover Beach, after the moon walk. Some of the stances struck are heroic: 'better not to study it then'—harm, that is; 'What to do now is clear, and worldless / You will bear what can not be borne'. This collection puts nothing so unspeakable into words. Instead, it gives us words to try on when we need them, and as long as we are able. As such, it is a considerable gift.

*Measures of Expatriation* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2016), the Forward Prize-winning collection from Vahni Capildeo, is a journey in seven parts, traversing lyrics, prose poems, notebook compositions, concrete poems, diary entries and criticism ('Louise Bourgeois: Insomnia Drawings'). Among these, the most arresting are the prose poems and her work in shorter lines. Of the latter, 'Handfast' and 'Stalker'—the two poems which bookend the collection—make extensive use of compounding and repetition to give a sense of the leaps involved in imagining and being imagined, watching and being watched, creating an alogic of sound that overrides anything like narrative sequence. 'Give Me Your Reasons' has a fluidity which could almost be set to music. Often we feel that we are working at the edges of the English language—for example, when 'hermits' functions as a verb. But then, given that this poet—who exists comfortably in several languages (including Old Norse)—claims that 'Language is my home, I say; not one particular language'—perhaps this is unsurprising. These points of phonic intensity are also present in the prose poems, yet with a different end. In 'Going Nowhere, Getting Somewhere', part III of *Poems of Expatriation*, repetition of the words 'wall' and 'floor' results in their temporary loss, leading to a reflection on language's capacity to contain thought. Capildeo has an ethical imperative to witness, but with the realist's sense of the ways in which narrative—whether personal or national—isn't straightforward. Whether watching television, or mapping the luxury of inattention, language has its limits. At times, the absurdity of this enquiry is very funny ('I need to delete the shortcut that is Timothy'). Throughout, there is an interest in how things come to be known, yet without abstraction: in this sense the poem 'To Stand Before' is a considerable achievement. Capildeo asks the questions that few are bold enough to ask—not just what it means to belong in language, but also why we read at all: 'Then the poets read. A fascination

was exercised through them. People came up to them, wanting something not human: sympathy untroubled by the need for explanation... (106)’

Rod Mengham’s *Chance of a Storm* (Manchester: Carcanet: 2016) is unexpected in several ways. To see so much new work together allows one to see continuities in style and problem which we may have previously missed. Secondly, to encounter so much continuity of syntax so as to add towards a poet speaking with self-reflection, but without interruption, shifting syntax or awkwardness, is a feat. As in Capildeo’s latest, there’s mastery in both the shorter lyric forms and the prose poems, the latter of which often fulfil Baudelaire’s sense that the best critical response to a work of art is another work of art. These poems are united by an interest in space, time and their grounding in perception and memory: they are interested in the directions of view and address, natural processes and animal life. Yet this description does not capture the quiet spoken music of these poems. ‘Suffixes’ is a bright clear day of a poem, boldly ‘addressing the female everyman of Saffron Walden’ in arching cadences which are both like and nothing like everyday speech. In ‘Ad Nauseam’ the figuration as choice and will as being in a boat is renewed in real time, in real speech. ‘Engineering Works’ pursues this question as to the relation between form and responsibility and politics explicitly: ‘The beginning of the end of the queue is the fourth estate / bored to death with its own freedom. Is this prosodic enough?’ Pushed to account for this speech-like music, I can point to tiny shifts in expectation at the level of the phrase. An obvious example would be ‘You strike while the iron / is conveniently arranged’—not when the iron is *hot* then. Yet there’s incrementally smaller and smaller juxtapositions perceptibly at work here. I might be ‘Waiting an entire life for the door to come ajar, / this door there, the one intended for nobody else’, and be surprised to find myself with the speaker, looking over ‘there’, and not over there, while the speaker remains ‘here’. Likewise, I can hear that ‘This is a hard lesson whatever it costs’ and consider, at the same time that the thought is cancelled, the loss of hard lessons *learnt*, or learning whatever *the* cost. Juxtaposition at the level of the line produces not shock, but wonder. ‘Fears before bedtime’ is probably the best example of this, as I pass through the effortless short flowing—but not tumbling—lines. This is a provocative collection of careful, skilled work, slowly and meticulously won.

Ian Patterson’s *Time Dust* (Cambridge: Equipage, 2015) might be loosely described as a series of cross-media experiments, which attempt what certain drawings by Siân Bowen drawings might do if done (though never done over) in poetry. However, what results is very far from an exercise or experiment. In ‘How Things Are’ the line breaks cut across the

continuity of syntax, and the short lines encourage a reading at speed that reminds us of Raworth. However, unlike Raworth's mid-career poems, this outpouring is not lyric in the mode of listening, but of language arranged to give us a sense of a speaking consciousness engaged in an exercise of making. This encountering consciousness faces materials, paper and the particulate world in all its fragility, yet discovers – perhaps to its surprise—that these things frequently act on us, and not the other way around ('free extrinsic wild plums'!). In the slower poems, syntax crosses lines and across larger units, arranged so that sentences often take a while to resolve, leaving us 'fingering what it is smells / burnt border moved slight sigh of air'. These poems therefore unfurl in glimpses, making a string of impressions that hover convincingly at the edge of what can almost be seen or known. Likewise, the phonic linkages of word stress, assonance and other links seem to cross at peak moments, producing phonic concentration, before they move off and apart again, like experiencing two frequencies come to an equal resonance, then pass. Perhaps it is because we have learnt how to read these tendencies by the time we come to 'Light Paper Material' that this poem is so striking. Accepting the suspension of syntax, and the ability of even so innocuous a phrase as 'in other words' to run two ways at once, allows us to read this as a highly charged and particular meditation on what will pass and what will stay: 'Passing may be in the sense or round under foot in / a terrifying search. He should listen. If he is made up / he must be. Perfectly if we get peace we do not get it / simply in nothing at all to happen to think it has been.'

John Wilkinson, *Courses Matter-Woven* (Cambridge: Equipage, 2016) is another A4-format book from Equipage, beautifully and carefully set. These poems, set like odes and composed as a sequence, present the paradox of a consciousness in continuity set against the threat of non-continuity, without anecdote, performativity or whales. This environmental bent in Wilkinson's work is not new, but it is more pronounced here. The reader—made motive and motivated by Wilkinson's levelling of all kinds of language act into a single lyrical utterance which can barely hold—which is to admit that there is enough left of lyric technique here to read this poem *as* an utterance, but never enough to be completely comfortable—is encouraged to pick their own way: through shifting attention to flight-paths, machine commands, birdsong, freedom, the orange suits of Guantanamo Bay, augury and haunting shifts of what appears to be then present, then absent:

What is called peewit calls.

Distance would become an intensifier.

Magnetic bands launch birds in due rankings: Now rotate:  
Not having been born sails into its trammels.  
Cloth gets thrown over its every eye (10).

This collection—dedicated, perhaps unsurprisingly, to the author of another set of poems which cannot be exactly said to be ‘about’ or ‘concerned with’ birdsong, J.H. Prynne—has many of the hallmarks of Wilkinson’s style: a subtle phonic patterning, cannily altered syntax, handled with the precision and curiosity of an analytic philosopher.<sup>1</sup> Hearing ‘march’ instead of ‘match’ (1), in our attention to what might be ‘un-elsed, un-othered’ (6)—including the future generations poses the reader on the edge of the question facing us facing nature today.

Peter Hughes’ self-confessedly ‘novel versions on kazoo’ cannot be called translations. Rather, *Cavalcanty*—with its pun on ‘cant’ as song and jargon—(Hunstanton: Oystercatcher Press, 2015) explodes the medieval troubadour. Hughes does this with an enthusiasm in which subtly speech-like four-beat lines, continuous syntax and puns working overtime lead to punchlines which are both clever and haunting. His conceits are inventive—the poet, abandoned, is ‘just as a hoovered keyboard will bristle / for days with static & indignation...’—which gets cleverer the more one thinks about it. Most surprising, perhaps, are his take on the lines: ‘I’vo come colui ch’è fuor di vita, / che pare, a chi lo sguarda, ch’omo sia / fatto di rame di pietra o di legno...’ [translating loosely: I’m like one outside of life, who seems, to those who look, like a man made of copper, of stone or of wood], rendered here as: ‘the worst thing about being a dalek / is how remote you feel from tender flesh/ & how every sexual position / makes you feel more like a fucking bollard.’ So much for Pound’s ‘daily... contemplation of things that are not of an hour’—though perhaps this might have struck a chord with his sense of Cavalcanti as a keen and precise ‘psychologist of the emotions’. Yet these poems are not always irreverent, in their ‘thinking through these things in ink / as love demands we loosen up our grip / on pre-existing modes of consciousness...’. They are often intensely brave:

So love carves out and empty space which aches  
to be refilled by interference waves  
to vast notions in everyday persons

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<sup>1</sup> See J. H. Prynne, *Sub songs*, (London: Barque, 2010).



do what they can to keep things thing alive.

Peter Gizzi's sequence *Field Recordings* (Cambridge: Equipage, 2016) thinks hard about the gaps between the archive in the mouth and the official line. Or, to put this another way: this sequence parses the paradox of how language which pre-exists us all continues to use or be used by each of us. Of course, with Gizzi, such problems are always deeply lived, rather than theoretical, and are often funny, frequently bathetic: 'The old language is / the old language. It don't mean shit.' These recent poems move masterfully out of speech into snatches of rhythm before the music fades again. I encounter: 'A sun-slashed parking lot, / thinking a poem / stalled / in the broken / surround', where a frequent-enough recurrence of two unstressed syllables together registers as a cadence, before the poem changes tack. The parking lot has beauty for a moment only. This fleeting music is also true of Gizzi's use of repetition. Stanzas occasionally approach the anthemic, yet this is soon curtailed. By the end of the sequence repetition and cross-references between poems have built up to allow us to witness not so much an attitude as a curious and self-reflective compromise regarding language, which slides unpredictably between predication and hypothesis: 'I hate how syntax/ connects me to shit / or say the day / is jewelled and burning, / the fire banking, / and none of its letters / produce the horror / at the heart of the index'. In 'Rime'—a title which asks us to consider both the technique and what the poem joins together—rhyme connects the absence of the 'sky' with a valediction: language can 'eat the sky' and 'say goodbye', but the parallelism separating 'the dust'—in which the poet stands—from 'the ordinary dust' of the old language also separates. Far from being theoretical exercises, the importance of Gizzi's more recent work might be grasped in the honesty of this poem's attempt to understand what it is to live in and in relation to language in community with others.